

# American

## NEWS & VIEWS

*A Daily Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy*

---

---

September 21, 2010

---

U.S. Partners Reduce Water Pollution in Lower Mekong River Basin .....	1
Some U.S. Small Businesses Regain Momentum .....	1
From the Original Americans, Lessons for the World .....	3
More U.S. Aid Comes in Response to Pakistan's Flood Needs .....	4

## U.S. Partners Reduce Water Pollution in Lower Mekong River Basin

By Nancy L. Pontius  
Special Correspondent

Littleton, Colorado — U.S. and Lao organizations are working to help clean up the That Luang Marsh outside of Vientiane, Laos, which has become polluted from human and industrial waste being disposed of in this wetland for many years.

The marsh — the largest wetland remaining in Vientiane Municipality — provides fish and water resources for the city, and also protects the Mekong River system by naturally purifying wastewater before it enters the river or groundwater systems, Dekila Chungyalpa, the Mekong managing director for the U.S. nonprofit World Wildlife Fund (WWF), told America.gov.

Over the past three years, the WWF has been working to reconstruct this wetland and restore its ability to absorb wastes, and to help Laotians appreciate the benefits of the marsh and be involved in planning for its future reconstruction. Considerable progress has been made, Chungyalpa said, because now “the Lao government has turned the marsh into a protected area, [while until recently] the marsh had been used as a waste site.” Currently, the WWF is in the process of transferring to the Lao government the urban plans that were developed for the area with input from local residents, industries and government representatives.

Throughout the Mekong River basin, waste from mines, people, animals and industries has been a major source of pollution. For example, “many unregulated industries use the river as a ‘waste management system,’” Chungyalpa said, and untreated discharge from the garment industry, fisheries, agriculture, food processing and other sources all ends up in the water. “It’s very hard to even monitor and track [waste discarded] by many small businesses” and illegal mines, she said.

Poor water quality caused by water contamination is harmful for the more than 60 million people who depend on the Mekong for drinking water and fish, she said. It also endangers wildlife in one of the most biodiverse regions of the world. In addition, pollution hurts the fishing industry, which is important as an export business and a local food source. The fishing industry is estimated to be worth more than \$9 billion annually to the regional economy, Tim Hamlin, research associate at the U.S. nonprofit Stimson Center, told America.gov.

To help track pollution levels in the Mekong basin, one U.S. nonprofit — the International Crane Foundation — conducts annual training courses in the region on

environmental monitoring. The latest course was held in Cambodia in July, and another will take place in a different Southeast Asian country in 2011.

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) sponsors these courses and helps teach a portion of the workshops. The International Crane Foundation focuses on the health of cranes, which require a healthy ecosystem to survive. People and wildlife have the same needs for unpolluted land and water, Charlie Demas, director of the USGS Louisiana Water Science Center, told America.gov. Pollution levels also impact the health of fish, which both cranes and people rely on as an important source of food.

### ALTERNATIVE WASTE TREATMENT

“To expand options of [preventing] accidental or deliberate leakage of livestock waste into rivers or other water bodies,” the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other organizations have been partnering with local swine farms in Thailand and Vietnam, Ashley King, co-director of the Methane-to-Markets Partnership’s administrative support group, told America.gov.

Demonstration projects have introduced Asian farmers to anaerobic digesters that treat livestock waste and produce biogas that can be used as fuel to generate heat and electricity. For example, in Tu Duong, Vietnam, swine waste is collected from 100 neighborhood farms via a canal system and treated in anaerobic digesters at a central location. The resulting gas is piped back to the families and used as fuel for cooking and lighting. Villagers pay a small fee for this service, which is used to fund a full-time operator and to maintain the waste-collection system.

Without treatment such as this, animal waste is often disposed of in lagoons that can leak or flood, King said, or the waste is discharged directly into tributaries, which carry the pollution into the Mekong River and eventually into the South China Sea.

The WWF also is working with the Vietnamese government to encourage standards for catfish farming that include preventing fish waste produced by food processing from being dumped in rivers. “These standards were put in place last year,” Chungyalpa said, “and WWF is now working to monitor and improve the implementation of the standards.” The WWF is hoping other countries and industries will develop similar practices, she added.

### Some U.S. Small Businesses Regain Momentum

By Andrzej Zwanecki  
Staff Writer

Washington — Some U.S. small companies are shifting

gears to go faster after the recent recession. Dennis Carmichael, co-founder of ERT Systems, a five-year-old company that sells a wireless tracking system for first responders to emergencies, saw a significant increase in orders five months ago. He has hired two new employees since, and the company, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, is doing better.

"But we are still below where we were three years ago" in terms of revenue, he said.

Other small businesses have not seen much improvement, even after the recession ended in 2009.

"It was the longest recession as well as a deep one," said William Dunkelberg, chief economist at the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB), a small-business lobbying group. "So your reserves are stretched."

The Great Recession ended in June 2009 after 18 months, making it the longest economic slump since the Great Depression of the 1930s, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. The U.S. economy shrank 4.1 percent from the fourth quarter of 2007 to the second quarter of 2009, according to Commerce Department figures.

Consumers are reluctant to spend, and credit remains tight. As the economy wavers rather than going straight on the road to recovery, some small and medium-size companies pull ahead, while others stall. For example, most small construction contractors continue to suffer because of little activity in the homebuilding sector. The depressed real estate market is also a drag on those business owners who used their own homes or real estate holdings as collateral or as a cash source to invest in their businesses or hire. Nearly all small-business owners own their homes, and about half own all or part of their companies' buildings or land, according to a 2009 NFIB report (PDF, 1.54MB).

But being more flexible and better at processing information than are large corporations, small businesses are resilient during recessions. Their basic survival tactic is to "defer all the spending they can," Dunkelberg said.

That is exactly what Carmichael did when the orders for wireless systems "dropped off the cliff." He and his partner laid off four workers, asked the remaining ones to work overtime and froze wages.

Laying off employees, however, was not an option for Tracy Hadley because her company, Harmonious Scents, had none. So instead, she cut inventories and negotiated better deals with website maintenance companies and Internet service providers. The 12-year-old Salt Lake City-

based company sells oils intended to relieve pain and treat other ailments.

Contrary to the popular perception, small businesses do not just hibernate during economic downturns. They position themselves to take advantage of opportunities that arise when the economy starts improving.

"You still want to have your company's name and good employees, and you want to make sure that your former customers remember you," Carmichael said. In the past two years, he has worked the phones to keep in touch with big clients in the automotive industry, a tactic, he said, that is paying off now.

Betsy Hanscom, the founder of Maine Warmers, has taken Web-design classes so she can upgrade her company's website herself rather than contract out the job as she initially planned. She also has tried to figure out how to use social networking platforms such as Facebook and e-mail marketing to draw more people to her website. Her 10-year-old company, based in Scarborough, Maine, sells heating pads.

Hadley of Harmonious Scents is considering taking hairdressing classes to gain expertise that she believes could help her reach more potential clients.

Despite all efforts, some small companies went down during the recession and others will meet the same fate before the economy significantly improves. And that is OK, according to Gene Marks, the owner of Marks Group PC, which provides consulting and technology services to small businesses. Marks, in an article published by Bloomberg BusinessWeek, says that those that survive will be leaner, more fit and stronger.

Some small companies actually thrive in hard times: for instance, those that sell goods such as bread and bagels or services such as mobile applications. Others take advantage of opportunities created by the misfortune of companies hit by a recession. For example, cheaper rents for retail or office space have been a boon for independent restaurants, gyms and other office-based companies that want to expand or relocate to premier addresses.

The health of the small-business sector is important for the U.S. economy because in normal times small and medium-size companies contribute about half of the gross domestic product and employ about half of the private work force, according to Dunkelberg.

Small business' confidence remains today at recession levels, according to an NFIB June survey (PDF, 486KB). That is why business owners seem unwilling to hire or invest, Dunkelberg said. To encourage them to do so, a bill pending in Congress would establish a lending fund

and provide them with tax breaks.

U.S. entrepreneurs are more optimistic about longer-term prospects, according to a May Citibank survey. More than 70 percent of the survey's respondents said they would start their businesses again, even if they knew in advance the challenges they would face, and more than half would recommend small business to their children as a career choice.

### **From the Original Americans, Lessons for the World**

*Native society is changing, but poet says its values and appeal remain*

By Jeff Baron  
Staff Writer

Washington — Kim Blaeser has some ideas on why American Indians hold an enduring fascination for people around the world: Indian culture helps them “to change their own relationship with what’s around them, to make them think about the world in a different way, to put themselves in a different place, to ask themselves different questions about what they’re doing in their lives,” she said.

Blaeser, an American Indian poet, will visit Bahrain in October as part of a U.S. State Department speakers program, sharing her poetry and evaluating the work of young poets there. Past trips for the speakers program have taken her to Norway and Indonesia, and a State Department videoconference led to a trip to Taiwan. Blaeser also has encountered the fascination for Indians as a professor at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, where she teaches creative writing, Native American literature and American nature writing. She is working on launching a native writers’ institute at the university.

Part of the fascination arises from a romanticized view of Native Americans, she said. The idea of the noble savage — untainted, spiritual, brave and in tune with nature — arose in Europe centuries ago, and it persists “in the sort of imagined Indian, the invented Indian. [Native American writer] Gerald Vizenor calls it the invented Indian or the postcard Indian,” Blaeser said. “It’s one that is kind of the stereotype. It’s the Indian on horseback wearing leather and feathers.”

“People want to get an Indian name or be a part of a tribe, but guess what: It takes more time, is more work and isn’t as clean and easy as they think it is,” she added. “People want to be involved in ceremonial things. So they don’t realize that native people have to apprentice for years before they’re taught things. So you can’t go on a weekend and get the teachings.”

The truth is more complicated, she said, and it emerges, among other places, in Indian literature and other arts.

“There’s this investment in tradition and the ancient,” she said. “But that’s not to say that if you went to any reservation home, kids aren’t going to have iPods. It’s possible to have both of those things at the same time — read Time [magazine] and also go to the powwow, listen to someone tell stories and whatever. There are even native hip-hop performers. So the music can be traditional ceremonial music, [and] it can be as contemporary as anything out there.”

New forms and other changes don’t make Indian arts less authentic, she said. “What [outsiders] want is the original, as if there was a moment in time when everything stopped and that was Indian. ... [Literature] will oftentimes bring in old stories into contemporary writing, and literally have the voices of other people, and I do that in my own work as well: traditional stories, but also stories of my family. So it’s like it’s an attempt to keep all of that alive.”

Even while participating in modern American society, Blaeser said, American Indians have worked to hold onto their traditional values. They don’t reject the materialism that they see in the broader American culture, but they recognize the tension between that and their own cultures.

“I grew up poor, really poor, and I never felt poor because we were rich in family. ... I never felt hungry, and apparently there was some struggle,” she said. “In my earliest years, we didn’t have running water, we didn’t have electricity, a lot of things we didn’t have, but I didn’t know that I was underprivileged, so I never felt that way. I felt very loved; I was lucky. Not everyone finds themselves in that situation.”

What she had as she grew up on the White Earth Reservation in frigid northwestern Minnesota was stories. She said one thing that seems to distinguish Native American writers from others is that they tend to embrace and celebrate their influences. “Native people don’t seem to have the need to divorce themselves from that past literary excellence, but instead want to apprentice themselves to that, to keep that a part of who they are,” she said.

“We become the stories we hear. We become the people and places of our past,” she said. “So that has to be part of how we engage with the world, then, right?”

The persistence of the past in Indian culture is especially appealing for people in countries that are in danger of losing the ceremonial and ancient aspects of their cultures — aspects that mainstream American culture seems to lack, Blaeser said. And the spirituality of American Indian culture makes it all the more appealing.



"I do think that people seek out other ways of looking at the world when they've become a little bit disenchanted with their own," she said. "And so I think that for many people, that is what native culture stands for, is this different way of understanding our place in the world. And part of that is the spiritual reality, and part of it is the way we relate to place."

### **More U.S. Aid Comes in Response to Pakistan's Flood Needs**

By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer

Washington — The most recent pledge of U.S. flood relief assistance for Pakistan, which includes a new \$75 million commitment, is targeting the country's food and agricultural sector, which was heavily damaged by flood waters that have washed out fields, livestock, seeds and farming implements only weeks ahead of Pakistan's wheat-planting season.

At a meeting at the United Nations September 19, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the United States has now provided approximately \$345 million in governmental assistance to Pakistan.

"This money has gone to relief and early recovery efforts, along with in-kind contributions and the very important rescue work that our American military has done in rescuing 15,000 people and providing 7 million pounds of relief supplies," Clinton said.

Heavy monsoon rains that began in July left one-fifth of Pakistan flooded, killing 1,781 people and affecting approximately 21 million, many of whom are in urgent need of emergency food, water, shelter and health assistance. The Pakistan flooding has affected more people than the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the 2005 Pakistan earthquake and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami combined.

Even as emergency aid continues to arrive from the United States and elsewhere, Clinton said Pakistan's eventual recovery and reconstruction will take a long time and will require it to closely coordinate with the international community.

"As the waters recede, the people of Pakistan must know that they will not be alone. They can count on my country and on the international community to stand with them, but we must better coordinate our efforts, we must be very mindful of what Pakistan tells us its needs are, we must make sure we are well organized in delivering the aid that we are gathering here today and in days and weeks ahead," she said.

The United States will "follow Pakistan's lead," the secretary said, and is looking to Pakistani authorities to

shape a strategy that best reflects the needs of their people. Clinton added that she is encouraged by Pakistani efforts to improve self-sufficiency by instituting economic and tax reforms, and noted that ahead of flood-reconstruction efforts, the Pakistani government is trying to raise domestic revenues and implement new energy policies, as well as establish "a structure to bring transparency, oversight and accountability to the reconstruction."

Clinton also said she has been encouraged by U.S. private sector donations to the Pakistan Relief Fund, launched by the State Department in August.

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Dr. Rajiv Shah told reporters September 20 that the \$345 million of U.S. assistance comes after the Obama administration gave an additional \$75 million as a direct response to a food assistance appeal by the head of Pakistan's National Disaster Management Authority, Lieutenant General Nadeem Ahmad, at the September 19 U.N. meeting

The \$75 million "will reach nearly 6 million people in terms of providing some form of food support," Shah said.

"It's quite clear going forward that agriculture will be one of the major priorities," Shah said. "More than a quarter of total cropland and nearly one-third of the productive capacity of Pakistan's agriculture has been severely affected. In many cases crops, livestock, feed stock and land are completely washed out, and we are looking at a winter wheat planting season literally over the next six to seven weeks."

The United States is seeking to support "an early recovery strategy for agriculture," Shah said, which includes the widespread distribution of seed and farm implements, as well as other help for farmers as they are able to return to their lands.

Ahmad asked for food assistance with strong local incentives, and the newly announced U.S. assistance is mostly targeted at local procurement, Shah said.

"Nearly \$70 million of the \$75 million will purchase seed from the existing food stocks in Pakistan, and that's important to continue to make sure there are market incentives for agriculture to be successful in Pakistan in the short term, since so much of the population there will depend on that over the next several months and indeed years," he said.

The Obama administration is also "constantly adjusting our [aid] portfolio to best meet the most immediate needs," he said. As flood waters recede, the risks of

waterborne disease such as cholera are increasing, so the United States is expanding its number of disease early-warning systems and diarrheal-treatment centers, especially those targeted to help at-risk children.

U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke said September 20 that the U.S. House of Representatives has authorized the Obama administration to redirect funding from the \$7.5 billion in civilian assistance funds that were authorized by the 2009 Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act.

"We had a very careful plan for Kerry-Lugar-Berman money," such as infrastructure projects to improve the country's water and energy sectors, Holbrooke said. But "with one-fifth of the country under water and an emergency, it's self-evident that some of that money should be redirected into other areas."

Holbrooke describe the September 20 U.N. meeting as "the first of three benchmark events," as the international community turns its focus beyond immediate relief efforts to addressing Pakistan's recovery and reconstruction needs. He and Clinton will be attending the October 14-15 meeting of the Friends of Democratic Pakistan in Brussels and the Pakistan Development Forum in Islamabad in mid-November.

By the time of the Islamabad forum, Holbrooke said, the flood waters will have receded and it will be a time to focus on reconstruction. But Holbrooke warned that the international community will not be able to pay the full costs of Pakistan's reconstruction needs, which could cost tens of billions of dollars.

Pakistan will not likely have the money to cover the costs, Holbrooke acknowledged, but it will still need to take the lead.

"The international community will be there," he said. "But Pakistanis know they have to do more, and how much they do remains to be seen and what the needs are remains to be seen."

(Preceding items distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://america.gov>)